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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA) and suggests how high school geography teachers can incorporate an understanding of RCA into the curriculum. The RCA, also known as Public Law 95-192, was passed by Congress in 1977 for the purpose of allowing the Department of Agriculture to appraise the nation's nonfederal soil, water, and related resources; evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing conservation programs; and develop a comprehensive program or strategy to guide future conservation efforts. Major activities undertaken to date to fulfill the requirements of the Act include development and publication of four RCA documents relating to RCA background and operations, encouragement of public participation, evaluation of public attitudes about the RCA process, and recommendation to the Congress by the President of a soil and water conservation program. Ways in which geography educators can incorporate information about RCA in their conservation courses include directing students to analyze RCA reference materials; predicting the impact of various conservation programs on society based on RCA data; participating in conservation processes on state, local, and national levels; and modelling classroom activities on RCA activities and objectives. (DB)

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RCA - RELATIONSHIPS TO GEOGRAPHIC EDUCATION

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RCA: RELATIONSHIPS TO GEOGRAPHIC EDUCATION

I'd like to share with you one of the most exciting and important events in the future of U.S. agriculture and natural resources conservation. Every citizen, rural or urban, will be affected by the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977. For the sake of brevity and in the best bureaucratic tradition, I'll abreviate that rather ponderous title to simply, RCA...standing for Resources Conservation Act. A bit later I'll give you a few thoughts on how you can use RCA in your classes. First though allow me to discuss the law and RCA process.

Public Law 95-192

In 1977, Congress passed Public Law 95-192, RCA. Under this law, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) will (1) appraise the Nation's nonfederal soil, water, and related resources; (2) evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing conservation programs; and (3) develop a comprehensive program or strategy to guide future conservation efforts.

What is being done to fullfill the requirements of the Act? The four major activities are: First: Development and publication of four RCA documents. Second: An active program of public participation. Third: An evaluation of public attitudes about the RCA process and, in particular, the contents of the documents. And fourth: The President's recommendation to Congress of his proposed soil and water conservation program.

Overall RCA guidance is supplied by an interagency coordinating committee, composed of representatives of nine USDA agencies,

the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ). Program leadership has been assigned to the Soil Conservation Service (SCS), with the continuing input of representatives of all coordinating committee agencies and other Federal and nonfederal agencies, organizations, individuals, and consultants.

DOCUMENTS

The Act requires USDA to appraise the Nation's nonfederal soil, water, and related resources. Related resources refer to wetlands, riparian vegetation, fish and wildlife habitat, windbreaks, and organic residue.

The appraisal of the resources is found in two draft documents. The first one, appropriately titled Draft Appraisal--Part 1, and made public September 4, 1979, includes information on the quality and quantity of the resources and is packed with statistical data on land capability, current conditions, and major uses of nonfederal land. It also contains an inventory of legislation and regulations dealing with resources and discusses the impact of technology on agricultural production and conservation. A most fascinating section of Part 1 is a condensed history of American agriculture and conservation.

To give you some flavor of the information found in Part I, here are just a few items:

...41% of the nonfederal land (614 million acres) consists of soils suitable for cultivated crops and other uses such as pastureland, woodlands, and urbanized lands.

...the nonfederal forest industry is, at present, producing at 68% of its biological potential;

...we've been losing 2 million acres of cropland annually since 1958 to uses other than agriculture;

...and we've been losing 500,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat annually since '58.

The second RCA draft document, Appraisal--Part 2, will present the projected demands on the Nation's nonfederal resources to the year 2030. In Part 2, a major portion of the document will describe the inherent capabilities and limitations of our resources in responding to projected demands. It will also suggest various levels of management that could be used to preserve our resources, provide data on trends in rural land ownership, and describe the contributions of state and local programs to soil and water conservation.

In the third RCA document, three to five "alternative" soil and water conservation programs will be outlined to meet the future needs of the Nation. Each alternative will be a relatively complete package of actions and activities that could be undertaken by USDA to meet specific soil and water conservation objectives.

Here is a general description of some of the ideas being considered in developing the alternatives:

(1) The major conservation problems appear to be greater in some regions than others, suggesting programs targeting these problem areas. This alternative means that we must not only target problem regions but also specific acreages within regions and counties.

(2) USDA is studying the use of various forms of program cross compliance. A basic form of cross compliance would be to make implementation of a Soil Conservation Service conservation farm plan a basic condition for assistance under production adjustment and other USDA programs.

(3) We are also considering what the proper mix for federal, state, and local responsibility in conservation should be. This comes largely as a result of the substantial contributions of nonfederal units of government to soil and water conservation.

(4) Another alternative being evaluated includes some form of regulation. On this matter, we are weighing potential solutions to conservation problems against the problems themselves. Those solutions that are more severe than the problems they are supposed to solve, either in terms of loss of freedom, higher costs, or administrative problems, do not appear attractive.

In the draft program document, we will present the alternative programs and their economic, social, and environmental effects for public review and comment.

The fourth and final RCA draft document is to be a summary of the three draft documents. This is the document that we think will be most useful and understandable for laymen.

Copies of all RCA draft documents are or will be available for public review in early 1980 at your local Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) and/or Soil Conservation Service (SCS) Offices.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The law mandates that the public be involved in RCA. The primary public participation activity is a 60-day public review period. During the review period 18 regional meetings will be conducted by Washington based teams. The purpose of the meetings is to inform the public about RCA and provide them an opportunity to comment about the process. Also during the public review period citizens, organizations, and agencies, will have opportunity to respond to any aspect of the RCA process including the contents of the draft documents. All written comments received during the review period will be sent to a special temporary office in Athens, Georgia, which will analyze public comments received during the RCA process.

The results of the analysis will be forwarded to Washington for the interagency coordinating committee's use in developing a recommended soil and water conservation program. The Secretary of Agriculture will then confer with the President, who will send his recommended conservation program to Congress. That, in essence, is the RCA process for 1979-80. And, we have to repeat it again in 1985 since the law requires a 5-year update.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN TO THE GEOGRAPHIC EDUCATOR?

What is the main deterrent to solving our conservation problems? Certainly it hasn't been the availability of technical solutions. Natural Resource conservation techniques have been known and practiced for years. The real problem seems to be the lack of knowledge citizens have regarding conservation of natural resources. Paul Sears, in his 1947 book, Deserts on the March, said:

> "Science has the power to illuminate, but not to solve, the deeper problems of mankind. For always, after knowledge come choice and action, both of them intensely personal and individual."

A 1936 report of the Great Plains Commission stated:

> "No constructive conservation program can be developed without changing the motivating attitudes and habits and redirecting the efforts...of citizens...In a democracy, education is more fundamental even than legislation as a force directing rational progress. It is the basis of wise legislation."

And a 1979 report by the USDA Land and Water Conservation Task Force identified lack of education and apathy as factors most frequently perceived as limiting the application of many soil and water conservation practices.

It appears that without strong educational involvement, the long-term objectives of a national soil and water conservation program might not be achieved. Education is required not only to stimulate individuals and groups to apply conservation practices but is necessary in order for the citizen to participate in the social and economic decisions required for the rational use of our natural resources.

Geography is the thread that binds you and me together through our diversity of academic interest and pursuits. I suspect our interest in specialize areas of geography grew out of an overriding interest in the earth and the mysteries it holds. These interests, combined with the fundamental knowledge of environmental principles you possess, make geographic educators a prime academic group to participate in the RCA process.

By now, I hope you've been stimulated to realize the potential of RCA and ways you can adapt all or parts of it to your classroom. But I would like to share just a few ideas on how you can use and participate in RCA in the coming months.

First: as you review the draft documents, you will realize there is a wealth of information that can and should be used in your class activities. The information in the appaisal documents presents the most up-to-date picture of America's natural resources. The availability of the RCA documents offers the educator and the student ready reference materials and a futuristic view of conservation programs and their impact on society. I want to caution you, though, the first group of RCA documents are draft copies. You may find errors, possible omissions of items you think should be included, and so on. This is to be expected and leads me into the second way RCA and you can come together.

You and your students can participate in the RCA process by reviewirg and analyzing the documents. In fact any part of the RCA process can be commented on, so, if one of your students has an idea about some aspect of RCA other than the process or document contents, encourage them to communicate their feelings to us.

Third: although we desire that all citizens participate, I have a special wish to have high school students become active in the RCA process. By the time they graduate, they are either voters or near voting age. Participating in RCA will help high school students make a real contribution to their own personal future by having a voice in shaping development of a national policy. A fundamental right of every citizen is participation in the democratic process, and RCA is one of many opportunities citizens will have to exercise that right in the coming years.

Fourth: the RCA process could be used as a model for in-class or in-school activities illustrating how citizens have a voice in their government.

Since the basic topic of RCA is natural resources and their impact on society, geographers could be leaders in formulating curriculums that could develop a resource inventory of the school site or even the community. To accomplish that, the procedures of writing, passing, and implementing laws could be followed.

In line with that, idea number five: RCA provides students an opportunity to study the implementation process of an Act, beginning with its historic and political history, its route to passage through Congress, and the procedures followed to carry out or meet the Act's requirements.

Conclusion

It's logical that formal education be a part of closing the gap between the level of public understanding of natural resource conservation and the knowledge necessary for making effective conservation decisions. Without developing the individual's environmental awareness and knowledge, we, as a society, will not achieve such goals as reducing the rate of soil loss, improving water quality and reducing pollution, increasing the ratio of caloric output to input in food and fiber production, and maintaining optimal long-term productivity of our land and water resources.

If those goals are something that you as a citizen and educator can subscribe to, then, in both process and intent, the Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act of 1977, provides an opportunity for meaningful educational experiences for your students.

The end result of educational involvement in RCA is that citizens will be more knowledgeable of RCA and the role agriculture and natural resource conservation has in their lives, whether they actually harvest the products of the soil or just reap the benefits.

Thank you.